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### Communicating Concern or Making Claims?

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**Communicating Concern or Making Claims?: The 2012 Press Releases of UK Child Welfare and Protection Agencies**

**Clapton, G. and Cree, V.E.**

**Abstract**

Child welfare and protection agencies play an important role in bringing concerns about children and young people to public attention. The press release is a key tool within this. This paper reports on findings from an analysis of press releases from selected UK child welfare and protection agencies in 2012. It demonstrates that the information contained in press releases is neither neutral nor dispassionate. Instead, press releases are found to be political artefacts, whose purpose is to galvanise and shape opinion and garner support for a particular standpoint, campaign or the agency itself. In this respect, they must be understood as 'claims-making' activities. Because of this, they should, it will be argued, be subject to the same critical scrutiny that we would expect to bring to the presentation of all 'evidence'.

**Key words**

**Child Protection, children and families, social constructionism, press releases, claims-making.**

## **Introduction**

This paper explores a subject that has received little attention in social work literature – the press releases of child welfare and protection agencies. Press releases are central to the communication strategies of all agencies; they perform a key role in transmitting ideas, information and, of course, opinion to the world inside and outside the agency, and as such, they both reflect and inform wider knowledge and beliefs. They also act as an agency's public 'face' to the world, reminding the public about its existence, as well as conveying information about particular campaigns and issues of interest to the agency. Gaining the attention of audiences is all the more important in an age dominated by mass communication; agencies cannot afford but to 'play the game' of media engagement, competing with one another as they do in an ever more crowded, information-saturated environment.

Given this, we have argued (Clapton, Cree & Smith, 2013), that UK child protection policy and practice have been subject to a series of moral panics that have, in large part, been fuelled by 'claims-makers' that include child welfare and protection agencies, academics, policy makers, trainers and practitioners. Such moral panics are focused disproportionately on 'risky' individuals and behaviours and the potential for 'bad' outcomes. This, it is asserted, has led social work with children and families towards a risk-averse approach that reduces its ability to support families in need. 'Claims-making' has also, it is argued, widened the scope of child protection, so that an increasing number of issues (such as childhood obesity) have been drawn into the 'protective' net. We conclude that a concentration on risk and harm has had damaging consequences for social work with children and families and for society as a whole; it has contributed to 'a coarsening of attitudes towards families in child protection work, a retreat from

preventative practice and a deterioration in relationships between social workers, service users and members of the public more generally' (Clapton, Cree & Smith, 2013, p. 1).

Press releases are central to the business and art of 'claims-making'; they are one of the routine ways through which agencies communicate their messages and concerns to journalists and to politicians and the general public as a whole (Woloshin & Schwartz, 2002; Lassen, 2006):

Claims-makers take special care when addressing the press. The news media serve as a gatekeeper for would-be claims-makers; simply receiving coverage helps validate a claim as worthy of consideration (Best, 1987, p. 115). As we shall see, this means that press releases are central to whether an agency retains or attracts attention to its services. A successful press statement is one that persuades journalists to pay attention to the claims embodied within:

...claims must fit the media's criteria for what Gans (1979) calls "story suitability."

Journalists are most likely to grant respectful coverage to claims featuring what they take to be relevant, appropriate grounds and warrants. Obviously, claims prepared with the media's practices in mind are more likely to get coverage. (Best, 1987, p. 116)

One detailed study of press releases is especially informative. Dutch linguist Geert Jacobs published a meticulous examination of press releases issued by the American multi-national company, Exxon, following the massive oil spill at Valdez, Alaska, in 1989. In this, he states that 'what makes press releases so special is that they are *told only to be retold*... press releases are meant to be "continued" as accurately as possible, preferably verbatim, in news reporting' (italics in original); Jacobs calls this process 'preformulation' (1999, p. 1). Press releases are, he suggests, not only written for journalists, but also for newspaper readers, TV viewers etc. They are written with different audiences in mind, and can therefore be characterised as 'divided discourse'. Jacobs proposes that by submitting press releases to inspection, it is possible to uncover the various strategies that are adopted to achieve the common goal of being 'retold'.

These include self-referencing, self-quotation, and what he describes as 'explicit semi-performative', a device through which an organisation tells the reader what the press release is about, with the intention that this is then picked up and used word-for-word by a journalist. More recent scholarship on press releases from within media studies literature reminds us that press releases today are much less dependent on the opinion of a journalist than in previous years, because they are likely to be published directly on agencies' websites (Lassen, 2006). This is part of a larger shift in news production, with conventional news production in decline, while 24/7 news has taken over on radio, television, mobile devices and through the World Wide Web. People are now accessing news where and when they choose, rather than at scheduled time slots (Bromley, 2010, p. 31). This has increased exponentially the scope and capacity for agencies to play a direct part in the formulation of news, and hence, public opinion.

It is vital, therefore, that press releases are afforded the same critical inspection that would be given to any publication. And yet, this has not been the case to date: there has been little interest in press releases beyond the disciplines of linguistics and media studies and no scholarly examination of their use in social work. Our study set out to change this, by opening up one particular set of press releases, that is, a selection of child welfare and protection agencies' press releases from 2012, for deeper analysis.

### **2012, the media and child welfare and protection**

There were many news stories about child abuse in the UK in 2012. In January, the media reported that Essex Council had paid damages of almost £1m to four siblings it had 'failed to protect' from years of parental sexual abuse. In May, nine men from Rochdale were jailed for 'grooming' girls for sexual exploitation. In August, the government launched an action plan to tackle child abuse linked to witchcraft or religion in England. But it was a television documentary alleging the former TV personality Jimmy Savile to be a serial and prolific sex offender,

broadcast in October that lit the touch-paper on media attention of child abuse in the UK (Furedi, 2013). This sparked a series of investigations that have continued to beset the BBC, the NHS, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Department of Health and care establishments throughout the UK, and a series of high profile personalities have been investigated by the police. This article is not concerned with the rights and wrongs of the so-called 'Savile affair' (for further discussion, see [moralpanicseminarseries.wordpress.com](http://moralpanicseminarseries.wordpress.com)). Suffice to say, 2012 brought the sexual endangerment of children to the public's attention in a particular way, as our examination of press releases will demonstrate.

### **The study: aims, methods and approach**

The aim of our study was to consider what, and more especially how, concerns about children and young people are communicated by child welfare and protection agencies; our method was to collect and analyse press releases issued in the UK in 2012. This, we believed, would give us greater understanding of the role played by child welfare and protection agencies as 'claims-makers'. We did not seek to explore how successful a given press release was in getting its messages across; this is a matter for further research. Instead, we interrogated the press releases as artefacts in their own right, looking firstly at what, and then how, they conveyed their particular messages.

The choice of agencies for the study was a purposive one (Oliver, 2006). Twelve UK-based national child welfare and protection agencies were identified. Most were non-statutory (third sector) agencies, but some were governmental bodies that play a prominent role in media communication on child welfare and protection issues. We included a mix of service-providing agencies, campaigning agencies and a number that are focused on children's rights, recognising that most agencies perform two or even three of these roles: such diversity is vital for their continued public support (Hammond, 1995). Specific issue-based agencies (for

example, the Anti-Bullying Alliance) were not included, because they were felt to be too narrowly-focused for our analysis. International agencies (such as Save the Children) were also excluded since our focus was the UK. The agencies that finally made up the study site were: Action for Children, Barnardo's, Children 1st, the Children's Society, Children's Commissioners (Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales), Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP), Children in Scotland, National Children's Bureau (NCB) and National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).

We began by looking at the agencies' websites, and found that most press releases from 2012 were still available online; we also wrote to one organisation to ask for its 'back' press releases and these were provided. Initial examination showed that press releases had been published on a wide range of issues in 2012, with topics ranging from adoption and fostering to youth unemployment. There were also a large number of press releases relating to local events and fundraising. These were excluded from further analysis because they were not specifically concerned with child welfare or protection. This left us with a total sample of 346 press releases. Each was summarised and assigned a category, depending on its topic. This produced a total of 22 categories (see below).

Figure 1 Here

Some initial observations may be made. It is evident that the passage of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 was followed closely. A total of 70 press releases were issued on this, warning the government and the public of the negative impact that welfare reforms would have on children, and especially on children who were already disadvantaged. The next most frequent theme was that of child sexual abuse, with 60 press releases concerned with this. Few press releases discussed other areas of concern that had been to the fore in previous years, including young

carers (only three press releases focused on this), bullying and homelessness (with only one each).

We chose to subject the 60 press releases relating to child sexual abuse to more detailed enquiry and analysis, because we believed that these would provide opportunity to explore the role of agencies as 'claims-makers'. Of course, our adoption of the term 'child sexual abuse' as an analytical category was not in itself unproblematic. Agencies did not define the terminology they were using in press releases, and in practice, press releases on this topic covered a wide variety of activities, including abduction, child sexual exploitation, child trafficking, missing children, rape, the internet etc. This reflects the broad and, at times, overlapping, conceptualisation of child sexual abuse in official policy, where, significantly, child sexual exploitation is included within the broader category of child sexual abuse (see [www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/safeguardingchildren/a00200288/tackling-child-sexual-exploitation](http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/safeguardingchildren/a00200288/tackling-child-sexual-exploitation)).

A breakdown of the number of child sexual abuse press releases issued is given in Figure 2. Here

We can see that some agencies published press releases on child sexual abuse frequently, while others did so rarely; furthermore, three agencies (NCB, Children in Scotland and the Children's Commissioner for Scotland), produced no press releases on this topic. This variability may be expected, given that child welfare agencies in the UK have very different objectives and very different histories (Kendall, 2003). But this is only part of the explanation. On its website, the NCB states that it is:



... a leading charity that for 50 years has been improving the lives of children and young people, especially the most vulnerable. We work with children and for children, to influence government policy, be a strong voice for young people and practitioners, and provide creative solutions on a range of social issues.

Given this mission statement, we might have expected it to have adopted a public position in relation to child sexual abuse in 2012. Instead, its 38 press releases covered a broad range of other child welfare issues, including child poverty, mental and physical health and well-being, sex education etc. We return to the notion of demarcation lines that appear to exist within the group of agencies whose press work we studied.

### *Our approach*

Of the various ways of exploring and understanding the nature and impact of press statements, it seems to us that social constructionism provides the most theoretically rigorous tools to do so especially because a large body of social constructionist writing is concerned with how matters become social problems. Constructionist approaches ask how and why particular social problems emerge and become the focus for demonstrations and protests, front-page news stories and television coverage, and new social policies (Loseke & Best, 2003), in other words, 'how do we know what we know' (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 5). In social constructionism writing, social problems are defined as 'the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions' (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977, p. 75). Claims are defined as: '...any verbal, visual or behavioural statement that tries to persuade audience members to take a condition seriously and respond to it as a social problem' (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 39).

Such an approach has helped us interrogate the content and role of press statements of UK child welfare and protection charities and to discuss how it is that some concerns come to prominence whilst others do not, i.e. 'how meaning is created by people who say things and do things to convince others that a problem is at hand and that something must be done' (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 251). Here it is necessary to acknowledge that debates within social construction have expressed concern about the dangers of making claims about claims-makers ('ontological gerrymandering' Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985), and the pitfalls of drawing conclusions about the validity of concerns wrapped in a so-called sociological objectivity. However recent writers within the tradition have suggested that making decisions about the value of claims cannot be avoided because this is a necessary aspect of writing about social worlds (Holstein & Miller, 2007). We agree and believe that relative merits of claims by child protection and welfare agencies ought to be scrutinised. As we have argued elsewhere (authors own, 2013), there has been and is a disproportionate, over-emphasis on certain dangers to children and young people, e.g. arising from their internet use. What is necessary for the profession and public influenced by the climate generated by claims made in the press statements, is a less 'neutral', more sceptical emphasis based on the belief that successful claims-making can detract us from greater evils. Because:

For all its horror, child sexual abuse (or physical battering) harms, indeed kills, far fewer children, either in [the United Kingdom] or the United States, than simple, miserable and unremitting poverty. Why, when poverty has been intensifying and welfare programmes run down, has our attention been drawn to sexual or other abuse? (Hacking, 1999, p. 133)

If the press statement is one of the greatest exemplifications of claims-making activity, just how does it do the job of persuading? A constructionist approach alerts us to how audiences might

be manipulated emotionally (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 253). When successful, claims can define not only the media and public perspective on a given 'social problem' but they can also 'change the characteristics of the objective world and they can change the characteristics of the cultural climate' (ibid. p. 145). Johnson argues that the increasing sophistication of press releases has led to success in that 'It is easy to see that the mass media perspective on child abuse is that promulgated by official agencies and their professional supporters' (2003, p. 271). We would add that the professional social work climate belongs in this list of those persuaded or, at least, influenced by the claims embedded in the press releases in our study. Social problems that come into focus through such claims are the business of what Loseke & Best term 'the troubled person's industry', by which they mean: 'all the organisations, programs, and groups designed to do something for victims, potential victims, villains, and potential villains involved in social problems' (2003, p. 217). For example, we would suggest that claims-making regarding the widespread nature of child abuse in the UK has contributed to risk being the dominant current in children and families' social work and an ever-expanding child protection discourse which now incorporates matters such as childhood obesity, hitherto a public health issue (Clapton, Cree & Smith, 2013).

## **Findings<sup>1</sup>**

### *Who is speaking?*

The first 'speaker' in a press release is the agency itself. Press releases usually begin 'The NSPCC is calling for action...'; 'A campaign was launched by Children 1<sup>st</sup> today...' etc. In a linguistic analysis of press releases, Jacobs (1999) argues that such third person 'self-referencing' is a characteristic feature of press releases; its function is to create the idea of

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that because press releases are, by their very nature, public documents, we have not sought to anonymise our findings; instead, all press releases discussed are identified as they have been published, by agency name and date or number (where no date was given).

formality, professionalism and distance in the communication. This, he suggests, will make it more likely that the audience accepts what they are hearing as authoritative. In reality, there are a number of authors of press releases, not all of whom are visible to the reader. The first is the person who wrote the press release. Most press releases are drafted by professional public relations officers who are trained in media studies and/or public relations (Sleurs, Jacobs & Van Waes, 2003; Traverse-Healy, 1995); they are unlikely to have a background in social work or child care, and will be more used to communicating with journalists, policy makers and politicians than with social workers or service users.

None of the press releases that we examined named a PR person as the author; on the contrary, they were all written as if they were statements of 'fact' from the agency that did not require authorship. Where a name was given, the frequent device was to quote the agency's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or its Deputy CEO. The use of the CEO as the spokesperson was, of course, deliberate. Their title itself carries authority and adds gravitas to the press release. Moreover, CEOs and others build relationships with journalists and policy makers and become recognised as 'experts' who will be contacted when a quotation is sought; the press release simply saves time for all concerned (Sleurs, Jacobs & Van Waes, 2003).

### *Self-Quotation*

It has already been stated that most press releases use quotations, frequently from CEOs or their deputies, to reinforce the seriousness of their messages. 'Self-quotation' of this nature can be 'lifted' and used verbatim by a news organisation, in a technique that Jacobs (1999) has referred to as 'prefomulating' the news. Such quotations often use language that shocks. Two examples are given here:

CEOP's Chief Executive Peter Davies said: 'I congratulate everyone involved in bringing this insidious and horrific criminality to justice and by so doing protecting its victims and preventing harm...'. (9<sup>th</sup> May)

Sue Berelowitz, the Deputy Children's Commissioner for England said: 'Children have told me of being abused, threatened, serially raped and subjected to other forms of violence resulting in them feeling worthless and losing all sense of self-respect. Tragically this is too often compounded by adults refusing to believe that is happening...'. (Press release 472)

Unusually for press releases, one agency included a direct quotation from the researcher who had carried out a study on its behalf. In reporting on her interviews with children living in 'gang affected neighbourhoods', Jenny Pearce from the University of Bedfordshire presented a more nuanced picture of abuse than conveyed by the full press release:

Our findings show that there are few clear boundaries between child victims and child perpetrators: children often both being abused and abusing others themselves. (Press release 486, Children's Commissioner for England)

This is difficult and, arguably, more troubling than the 'I thought I was the only one' message that is given prominence in the press release overall.

### *Who is the audience?*

Press releases are written with a variety of audiences in mind: journalists and the media and through them, politicians, government, professionals and members of the public. They are also, increasingly, written for 'lay' readers; the publication of press releases on agency websites

effectively bypasses journalists and allows the agency to speak directly to the public (Lassen, 2006). Press releases, furthermore, address the agency's own internal audience: its staff and perhaps more importantly, its committee members and funders. Their function is to position the agency as the, or an, authority on the matter and to maintain that agency's status in the public, professional and funders' eye.

All of the press releases we examined demonstrated this diverse audience-base. Some agencies' press releases (for example Barnardo's) included an invitation to readers to donate and sign up for newsletters, as well as providing information about campaigns, links to reports, and specific information about services provided. Some (for example, the Children's Commissioner for England) gave details about their media staff; others (for example, NSPCC) also advertised their helpline number. Some press releases directly addressed those who might best described as sceptics. For example, one stated:

Three words that mean so much and can have such an impact on someone's life – child sexual exploitation (CSE). Three words that most people don't want to hear and would perhaps like to ignore... (30<sup>th</sup> January, Barnardo's)

The image here is of an uncaring or un-listening public and a caring child protection sector, referred to later in the press release as 'the child protection community'.

### *Demarcations*

Examination of the press releases from 2012 showed that the major children's welfare and protection agencies tended to keep to their own 'turf', for example, Action for Children wrote most often about poverty and neglect, while Barnardo's focused on child sexual exploitation, NSPCC on child sexual abuse and CEOP on the internet, although there was a great deal of

overlap in relation to the internet and child abuse, and, of course, between child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Laying claims to a particular 'angle' or field in child welfare and protection is vital for organisations if they are to succeed in becoming the 'go to' people for particular aspects of child welfare and protection, thus increasing their 'expert' role and their opportunities for influencing policy, campaigning, carrying out research, and, crucially, fundraising. Press releases exist in a crowded environment, not only in terms of journalists' attention but also in the context of attention of resource-providers. Competition for press attention and therefore public interest is a key feature of claims-making activity, Best argues that as claims-makers gain experience, their presentations:

...may become more sophisticated, even cynical. Claims-makers learn ways to mobilize and maintain public support, they learn how to get press coverage by constructing claims which are newsworthy; and they learn to identify key policy-makers and recognize the levers which can move policy. These lessons may come through personal issues, but the result is increasingly polished claims. (1987, p. 115)

A second aspect of such informal demarcation practices can be seen in the ways that particular expert knowledge was demonstrated in our study sample. Firstly, we can identify signifiers of professional expertise. These included the use of specialist terms such as 'grooming', 'sexting', 'e-safety', 'cyber-bullying' and 'peer-to-peer exploitation'. They sometimes occurred together with acronyms such as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Such signifiers function to remind the audience, but particularly the government, funders and other professionals, that behind the release, there are knowledgeable people in command of specialised expertise. According to Best one of the most fundamental forms of claims-making is defining and naming a problem: 'Identifying the topic under discussion limits what can be said; a definition makes some issues relevant, while relegating others out of bounds' (Best, 1987, p.104). In keeping with the

theme of control: claims-makers seek to persuade: '...they want to convince others that X is a problem, that Y offers a solution to that problem, or that a policy of Z should be adopted to bring that solution to bear' (Best, 1987, p. 102). Further not only is the importance of the agency's definition at stake, so too is the acknowledgement of it as leading authority because to:

"own" a social problem is to possess the authority to name that condition a "problem" and to suggest what might be done about it. It is the power to influence the marshalling of public facilities - laws, enforcement abilities, opinion, goods and services - to help resolve the problem. (Gusfield, 1989, p. 433)

Gusfield refers to this as a form of 'institutional self-preservation' (p. 436). If journalist attention is caught, according to Johnson:

The publication of child abuse stories also helps many professional and occupational groups, social science and media researchers, and various private and non-profit agencies. These agencies establish agendas for the child abuse movement. They are invariably tied to requests for more resources and more public funds. (2003, p. 271)

Thus not only do press statements need to stake out territory and compete for the attention of journalists they also compete with the press statements from 'fellow' welfare agencies:

Every day, for example, we are bombarded with claims about conditions we are told to worry about. While the potential supply of social problems seems limitless, public worry is limited. It is not possible to worry simultaneously about the problems of crime, and poverty and abuse and terrorism and the economy and the environment. (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 39)



After author, audience and the competitive nature of the press releases, our constructionist exploration of the 'inner world' of the press statement delves into two key features. Firstly the use of figures as in the number affected by the 'social problem' and secondly the language.

### *Figures*

'big numbers indicate big problems' (Best, 2003, p. 44)

Best points to the use of estimates usually, as embodied in the suggestion that what we know is just a fraction of what exists because 'The bigger the problem, the more attention it can be said to merit, so most claims-makers emphasize a problem's size' (1987, p. 106). In his study of the concerns about missing children in the USA in the 1980s, Best drew attention to numbers-inflation:

By including runaways to estimate the number of missing children and then focusing attention on atrocity tales about stranger abduction, claims-makers led many people to infer that the most serious cases were commonplace. Studies of public opinion found that most people assumed stranger abductions were common, accounting for a large share of missing children. (1987, p. 107)

Best also pointed out that figures for missing children also included children that had been removed from the family home by a non-resident parent. However, not only were the claims contestable, a key aspect of the dimensions of the problem was that the claim suggested that things were getting worse, 'the problem is growing and, unless action is taken, there will be further deterioration' (1987, p. 108). However, those that dispute the figures can find themselves countered by the justification that the agency acts on behalf of all and any children, i.e. that one missing child is one too many. Such a claim is a powerful persuader and

necessary in the competitive world of claims-making. To be viable in the face of such competition, claims must have compelling justifications. 'The understanding that children are powerless innocents, coupled with a definition of all missing children as facing terrible risks' (Best, 1987, 110) presents just such a powerful rationale.

Many of the press releases we studied cited the agency's own service-data to provide numerical evidence for a particular approach that was being taken or message conveyed. For example:

At Barnardo's 31 per cent of the 3,500 young people we looked after through our sexual exploitation services in the last six years were in care. (3<sup>rd</sup> July)

Two points were being made in this press release: firstly, that almost a third of the children who were affected by sexual exploitation whom the agency helped were in care; and secondly, that Barnardo's had helped 3,500 children who were sexually exploited. The second point is just as important as the first; 3,500 seems like a high figure, and demonstrates not only that this problem is a significant one, but that Barnardo's can be relied on to do something about it. What is **not** said in this press release, however, is what is meant by 'in care': is this term being used to refer to children who are being accommodated away from home, or also to those who are on home supervision? The answer to this question matters, because not only does it affect the numbers claimed, but it will affect how we view the information given.

The press releases also presented findings from research conducted by the agency concerned. For example, on the topic of looked after children going missing for more than 24 hours, Barnardo's states:

DfE stats out today show a substantial rise in looked after children who go missing for more than 24 hours from their agreed placement. The figures leapt from 1,040 in 2011 to 1,610 in 2012. (25<sup>th</sup> September)

The figures, at face value, seem high, but again what we are **not** told is how many children were looked after in England at this time; was this a small or high percentage of the total group?

Without this information, it would be difficult to make an independent assessment of this problem. Likewise, it is necessary to ask what the reported increase was actually about: might it not show better recording systems or greater sensitivity to the issue, rather than a rise per se? Figures presented without context are notoriously difficult to judge, as demonstrated as long ago as 1954, in Huff's ground-breaking book *How to Lie with Statistics*. Since then, generations of criminologists and others (e.g. Best, 2004) have drawn attention to the unreliability of 'evidence' based on figures and statistics that are not sufficiently explained or contextualised.

There are other examples of unclear presentation of statistics in the press releases from 2012. A standard device is to calculate how many children are affected by a specific problem. For example, CEOP reported on 23<sup>rd</sup> May that 'more than one child goes missing every five minutes'. Confusingly, this figure changed without comment in a press release from two days later. This stated: 'A child goes missing in the UK every three minutes...', yet the press release then went on to present the same data as before. What are we to make of this figure, whether three or five minutes? It is clearly high, and therefore, of concern. Again, we come up against the familiar issue of what is not said in the press release. Close examination reveals that the figure includes children who run away overnight on at least one occasion; we have no information about the percentage of the total group that are in this category, suggesting that one child (or a few children) may be responsible for many of the missing incidences.

Finally, in these calculations, one phenomenon is often elided with another. For example, reported incidences of missing children were often presented as ‘missing children’, but counting the number of *times* children were absent from home or care is not the same as counting the number of *children* who had run away, because one child could be responsible for any number of incidences of running away. Similarly, *allegations* of child harm frequently ‘morphed’ into *offences* against children. This is evident in one press release about the number of reported sexual assaults on children:

Despite the number of convictions rising by around one-quarter from 1,747 in 2007 to 2,135 in 2010 fewer than 10% of offences result in someone being sentenced. (4<sup>th</sup> April, NSPCC)

What is actually being reported here is allegations of sexual assault, reported offences not convictions. In the same vein, the reporting of ‘worries’ regarding possible child sexual abuse was presented in one press release as children ‘suffering child sexual abuse right now’ (25<sup>th</sup> October, NSPCC). Here ‘concerns about’ are counted as evidence of abuse.

Reports of statistics in relation to sexual offences are similarly problematic. For example, on 4<sup>th</sup> April, the headline in NSPCC’s press release stated: ‘Figures obtained by the NSPCC reveal sixty child sex offences a day’. This number was arrived at by dividing the total number of offences reported to the police every week in 2010-2011 (n=400) by seven, then rounding up the number (from 57.14 to 60). By the second page of the press release, in a quotation from the Head of NSPCC’s Sexual Abuse programme, this number becomes ‘more than sixty children being sexually abused every day’. What is not clarified in the text of the press release is that an offence reported to the police is an allegation, and that this is not the same thing as a crime.

A third example again relates to the NSPCC. A press release from 15<sup>th</sup> October is headlined: 'Average of 35,000 child abuse images found every day'. However, on scrutiny, it becomes clear that this figure was based on the confiscation of 26 million such images in two years. The claim had been arrived at by dividing the number of images by two to arrive at an annual amount, then 365 to arrive at a daily amount. There are two issues here. Firstly, such a calculation ignores the reality that a small number of people hold a very large number of images, as the press release sub-heading admits: 'Some offenders caught with 1 million pictures'; and secondly, if this is accurate, then it makes it impossible that 35,000 images could have been 'found every day' over the two year period.

As well as using facts and figures, press releases often simply allude to 'research evidence', without providing any substantiating information on which the reader can assess the claims being made. The phrase, 'research has shown', regularly appears without citation as in '...research has shown that victims are getting younger and younger and are being assaulted in ever more grotesque and violent ways'. (15<sup>th</sup> October, NSPCC).

Other facts may also be alluded to and not backed up. The same press release goes on to assert: 'It's not unknown for an offender to go very quickly from viewing pictures of secondary school children to images of three year olds who have been bound, gagged and assaulted'.

### *Language*

The understanding of social problems must rely primarily on analysing the rhetorical work of claims-makers and their ability (or lack of it) to appeal to public tastes and prejudices, which may or may not be well founded. (Jenkins, 2009, p.36)

Claims-makers must construct images of conditions, the victims who are harmed by it and the villains (social structures, social forces, individuals) who cause it. (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 77), therefore, in social constructionist terms, language, the words chosen and how they are used – rhetoric – is central, not peripheral, to claims-making. Claims-makers intend to persuade, and they try to make their claims as persuasive as possible. Claims-making inevitably involves selecting from available arguments, placing the arguments chosen in some sequence, and giving some arguments particular emphasis. These are rhetorical decisions. (Best, 1987, p. 115). Embedded within claims are what Loseke & Best term ‘motivational frames’ that:

...can appeal to emotion in addition to – or rather than – logic; they might encourage audience members to feel in particular ways rather than to think in particular ways. For example, we can feel anger or disgust when we hear about social problems conditions...These emotions of fear or anxiety are very powerful in persuading audience members to support claims-makers’ assertions that a condition can be eliminated. (2003, p. 109)

Such emotions are centred on the victim of a given injustice because ‘It is usually far easier to encourage audience members to feel sympathy for victims than it is to motivate audience members to feel hatred for villains. There is a tendency for claims-makers to pay far more attention to constructing images of victims than images of villains’ (Loseke and Best, 2003, p. 111).

Urgency is another theme that flows through the work of the press statement: ‘successful claims – those that persuade audience members to evaluate the condition as a social problem – combine to produce a social problems formula story. This is a story of extreme harm done to pure victims with a moral that something must be done!’ (ibid, p. 112). Dramatizing extreme

violence and extreme consequences encourages readers to evaluate the designated concern as intolerable and immediate action necessary:

Urgent action is needed to protect the hundreds of young girls and boys who are being trafficked, abused, raped and exploited for sex. (18<sup>th</sup> October, Barnardo's)

The use of emotional language is found throughout the press releases, more so in the case of some agencies than others, and phrases and terms appeared frequently. For example, babies were described as 'defenceless'; children were 'preyed upon' / 'victims' / 'survivors' and abuse must be 'stopped in its tracks'. Calls for help come in 'waves' or a 'surge', and yet, 'we don't know the true level of this threat', 'the true scale is far larger'; and, we are told, the figures only show us 'the tip of the iceberg'.

Some press releases used particularly lurid language, often in the direct quotations. For example: 'Too many children from all walks of life can so quickly be caught up in a world of drugs, violence and sex – this is a sickening slur on our society and we must do all we can to end it' (17<sup>th</sup> January, Barnardo's); 'If we can halt this vile trade and [...] sordid business for sharing these images'. (15<sup>th</sup> October, NSPCC).

Others used terms that alluded to warnings, epidemics, threat and suspicion. Sexual abuse is compared to an outbreak of chronic disease, as, for example, the NSPCC called for 'urgent action to stamp out the illegal trade in child abuse images', where the choice of the phrase, 'stamp out', invokes ideas of pestilence; we must, it continues, 'stop the spread of this material' (15<sup>th</sup> October). Press releases regularly use the words, 'shocking', 'vile', 'saddening', 'appalling'; 'plight'; the use of these words encourages horror, disgust and anger and are important in encouraging calls to action. One press release takes this even further. It stated:

... that this hidden crime takes place in Scotland every day and in many walks of life is truly sickening. In simple terms, child sexual exploitation is the biggest hidden child protection problem in Scotland today. (30<sup>th</sup> January, Barnardo's)

How is a judgement to be made here? The subject is claimed to be both 'the biggest' and 'hidden'. The hidden or the tip-of-the-iceberg nature of child sexual abuse, epidemic imagery and defenceless victims are rhetorical motifs to construct feelings of calamity and child endangerment:

The implication of the rhetoric of calamity is that now is not the time for sorting out ethical grounds. There will be time enough later for "mere" talk; now is the time for action. A claim expressed in this rhetorical idiom may lend itself to gathering high degrees of serious and prolonged attention in the public press. (Ibarra and Kitsuse, 2003, p. 41)

## **Discussion**

Our study of press releases is highly unusual within social science, never mind within social work. Social science has traditionally seen documents as uncomplicated, almost exclusively as 'containers of content', rather than 'things that can be produced and manipulated, used or consumed', and things that 'can act back on their creators' (Prior, 2004, p. 77). If documents have been treated as 'facts', then press releases have been ignored completely, except within linguistics and media studies. As Ransohoff & Ransohoff observe, 'A press release exists beyond the checks and balances that are part of the peer review culture of a journal' (2001, p. 186), allowing agencies to 'present one-sided information, information from the point of view of



the organisation on whose behalf the release was written' (Walters, Walters & Starr, 1994, p. 345).

Our study has demonstrated that although the press releases of child care agencies exist almost without scrutiny, they can be seen as examples of 'claims-making'. In the words of the moral panic theorists, Goode & Ben-Yehuda:

Claims-making is one of a variety of methods or tools social movements have to help them achieve their goals. It is part of the struggle for the hearts and minds – and consequently, the time and the pocketbooks – of the public, legislators, and the media. (1994, p. 119)

Claims-making is the principle means through which claims-makers or 'moral guardians' galvanise support for their cause or position. It is through claims-making that agencies compete with one another to show not only that they are still the most important and knowledgeable 'experts' on a given subject, but, to put it more contentiously, they show that they care the most. Social work, and in particular, child care agencies have suffered from a constant stream of negative publicity, stretching back at least over the last 20 years (Butler & Drakeford, 2003; Chenot, 2011; Jagannath & Camasso, 2011). In addition, the impact of contractual government funding and competitive tendering on voluntary organisations has been to pitch agencies against one another in a world of increasingly scarce resources (Buckingham, 2009; Carmel & Harlock 2008). Our press releases thus cast a spotlight on child welfare agencies as they struggle to retain influence and remain in the public eye, at a time of diminishing funds.

Claims-making, we would argue, has not been without its consequences. Press releases have played a significant role in contributing to fear and anxiety, not just about children and

childhood, but about the relationships between adults and children in society. In 2002, Altheide argued that 'Fear is more visible and routine in public discourse than it was a decade ago' (2002, p. 58) and that claims-makers 'learn to cast their statements in a context of fear relationships' (2002, p. 54). Ten years on, our study has given significant evidence of this process; moral panic analysis suggests that while alarm and fearful attention is drawn towards some high profile, stereotyped group or problem (whether this is paedophiles, internet pornography or whatever), our gaze is drawn from more intractable social issues (including the differential impact of the economic recession on the poor and the young) (Cohen, 2002).

Concerns about child sexual abuse are not, of course, new. Cree, Clapton & Smith (2014) discuss this in their analysis of the 1885 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' series, published in London's *Pall Mall Gazette*. The 'Maiden Tribute' series, which purported to expose the nature and extent of juvenile prostitution (as child sexual abuse was referred to at that time) in London, used all the same lurid language and rhetorical devices that have been identified in the 2012 press releases. Cree, Clapton & Smith argue that the 1885 moral panic distracted public attention away from social changes caused by industrialisation and urbanisation, and instead heralded a process of bourgeoisification of attitudes towards men, women and children. Although the greatest number of press releases from 2012 were on the topic of welfare reform, the collective weight of the press releases in our sample give an impression of a chronic level of alarm and fear surrounding 21<sup>st</sup> century childhood (Altheide, 2002). This, we believe, must be placed in the context of the increasing impoverishment of disadvantaged families and communities in the UK (Bradshaw, 2011; Holmes & Kiernan, 2013) and an increasing regulation of children and childhood (Wyness, 2014).

## **Limitations**

All research has limitations, and it is important that the choices and decisions made by researchers are open to scrutiny. The chief limitations of this study are firstly, our choice of year of press release; a study of previous and subsequent years might offer different results in terms of both topic and quantity and quality of coverage. Future research could extend this study by looking at a greater spread of years. Secondly, our selection of agencies was UK-based and conformed to our view (discussed earlier) of what constitutes a leading children's welfare agency. A third limitation is our choice of subject matter for detailed analysis, that is, child sexual abuse. We have explained that the term is a contested and problematic one for which there is no universally agreed definition; moreover, this was the second most frequently-occurring topic of the press releases that we examined (as stated, welfare reform was the most common topic). Our decision to focus attention on this topic rather than welfare reform was imperative given the way that the press releases were crafted; those relating to welfare reform were much less emotive, and would have generated far less interesting insights. Again, future research could expand the range of topics under analysis, and look more broadly at the role of the press release in different contexts.

## **Lessons for social work**

The press release, we have argued, is crafted and intended to get across a message; it is, in the words of Jowett & O'Donnell (2012), a 'persuader', not just a vehicle for the communication of facts and information. This is an important message, as politicians, policy makers, social work practitioners, social work students and members of the public are regularly influenced by the alarms engendered by the type of press releases to which we have drawn attention. As we go forward, it behoves us all to give press releases the same critical review that we would expect to give any academic research study or government publication. There are also lessons for child care agencies themselves: are they communicating concerns, or are they, as 'claims-makers'

within the wider discourse of children, childhood and child protection, contributing to the disproportionate societal and professional reactions? Media coverage of social work is inevitably preoccupied with tragedies and the perceived failings of social work and social workers (Franklin & Parton, 1991; Reid & Misener, 2001); social work has little agency in such processes. Given that this is so, our analysis suggests that social work agencies must therefore take much greater care and control in the craft of press release-writing and publication.

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## Figures

Figure 1: Child welfare agencies press releases in 2012

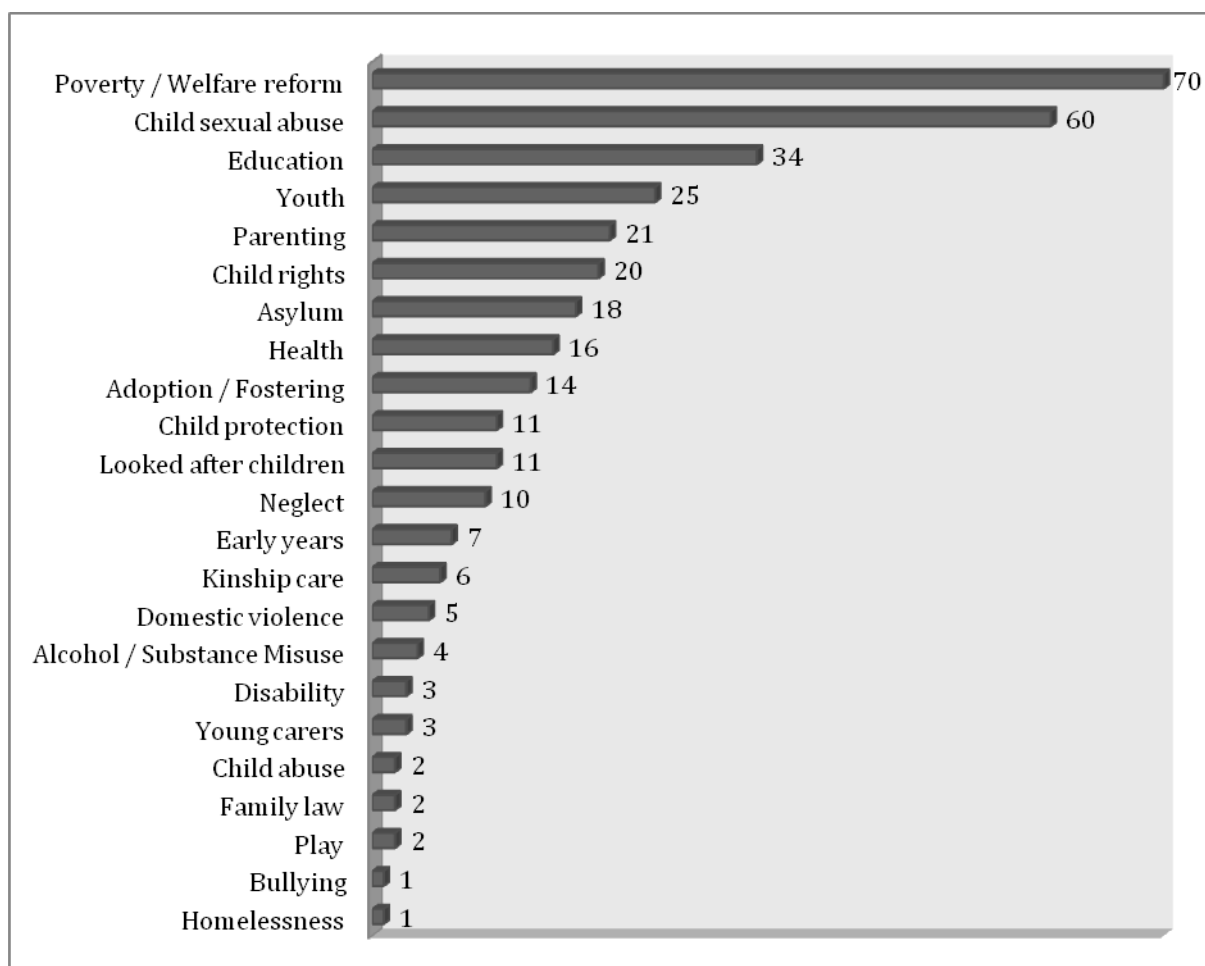


Figure 2: Number of Press Releases on Child Sexual Abuse per Agency

